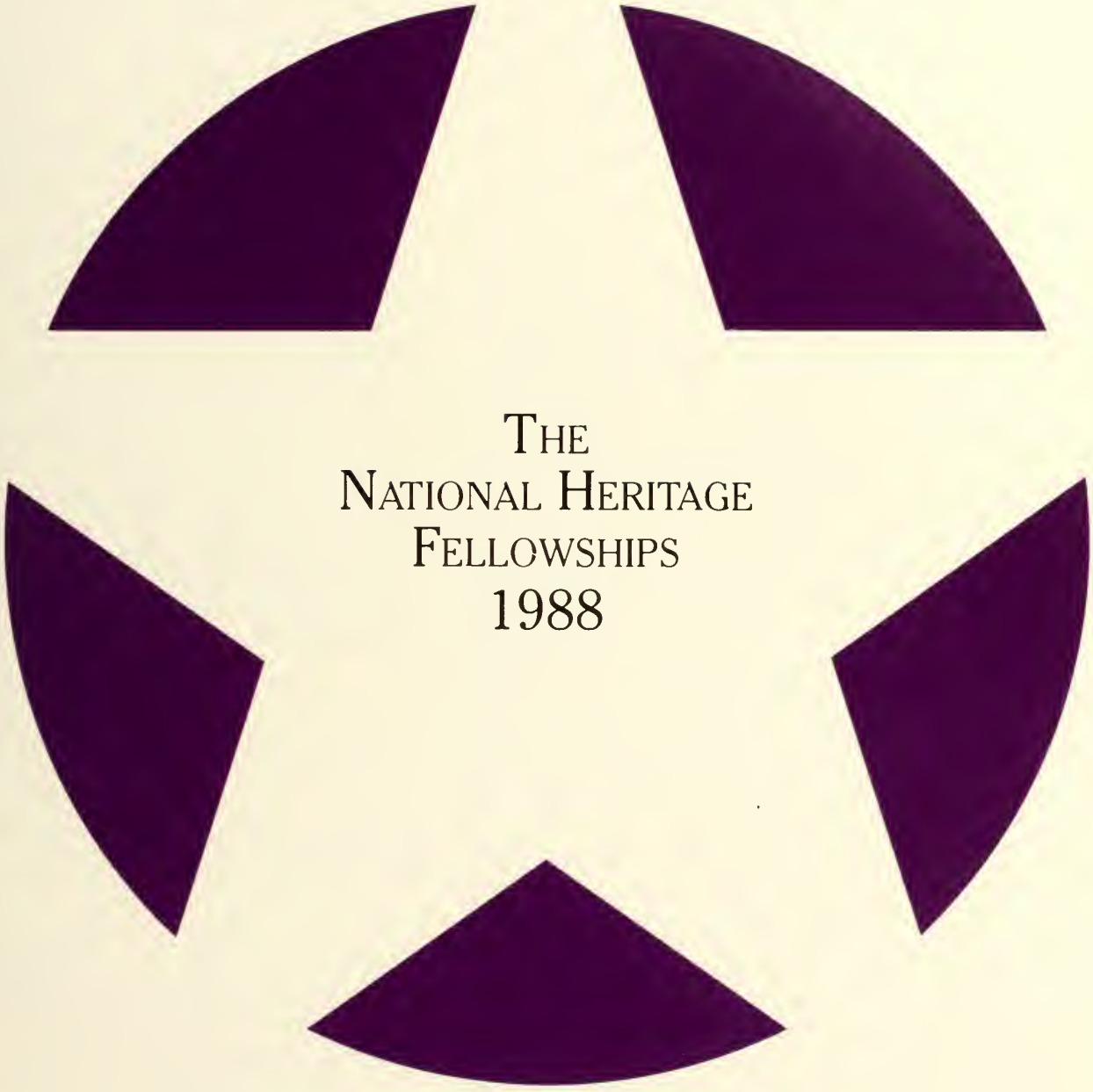
# The National Heritage Fellowships 1988



# The National Heritage Fellowships 1988

The National Endowment for the Arts
Folk Arts Program

# The National Heritage Fellowships 1988

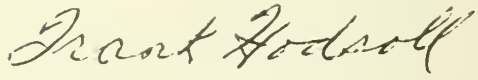
It was seven years ago that the National Endowment for the Arts, through its Folk Arts Program, presented the very first fifteen National Heritage Fellows to the people of the United States. It was a proud and joyful moment that night in Washington, D.C. when the first fifteen walked out on to the stage. It had taken a long time to bring the whole concept into being; as it developed it was at first quite a lot like the Japanese program of "national living treasures" and then gradually less and less so. Overall, it came to seem that this American program should be conducted gently and slowly, including ever more artists and art forms, more home towns, more cities, more languages, more cultures and occupations, recognizing that traditional skills in our far-flung nation are more often features on a local landscape than widely acclaimed monuments.

The National Heritage Fellowships serve to alert us to the existence in the United States of an extraordinary number of different ways of creating beauty, each the product of a different group of people with a different history and a different vision, each alive and well and crackling with energy and creative force. We see no end to them, and so far we see no need to alter the principles or the procedures through which these remarkable artists are chosen for this honor each year.

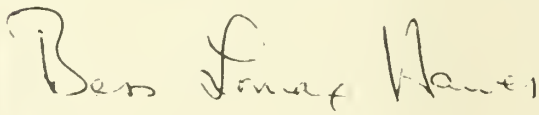
We will continue to accept nominations in the form of simple descriptive letters from anyone who chooses to take the trouble to write them. We will continue to use authenticity, excellence and contributions to the particular art form as our essential criteria, adding only that the individual should also be worthy of national recognition. We will continue to defer the recommendations for these awards to a peer panel of experts chosen anew each year for their breadth and experience and their combined wisdom.

Finally we will continue to try to make plain the inclusiveness of this program, how these fellowships gather in and celebrate old immigrants and new together, the visual artists and the performing artists, the speakers of many tongues, people who live in our quiet places and people from our teeming cities. This year we are proud to include artists from three states not represented before: North Dakota, Rhode Island, and Vermont. We are proud also to bring you the youngest artist so far honored through this program, Michael Flatley of Chicago; the first egg dyer, Kepka Belton of Kansas; the first Asian weaver, Madame Yang Fang Nhu, who did her early work in this country in Rhode Island and who now, like so many other Americans, has moved on to a new home in a new state.

Like the artists of the preceding six years, these creative and fruitful individuals will tell you they are only parts in a longer human progression, that they learned from past masters and that their futures will rest with those who will learn from them. The National Heritage Fellowships simply serve as a temporary pause in this unending stream of creative energy, a time when we can reflect on how lucky we are, how great a debt we owe to our traditional artists everywhere. We welcome you to the celebration of the National Heritage Fellowships for the year of 1988, for the years before, and for the many, many years to come.



Frank Hodsoll, Chairman
National Endowment for the Arts



Bess Lomax Hawes, Program Director
Folk Arts Program
National Endowment for the Arts

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This ceremony and related activities have been planned with the assistance of the National Council for the Traditional Arts (N.C.T.A.), a private non-profit corporation founded in 1933, dedicated to the presentation and documentation of folk and traditional arts in the United States. The National Endowment for the Arts would like to thank the N.C.T.A., the Joseph Martinson Memorial Fund, the Arts Club of Washington and WETA-FM for their assistance in the presentation of these fellowships.

National Heritage Fellowships are open to exemplary master folk artists and artisans who are nominated by one or more citizens for the one-time-only awards. For information about nominating a folk artist or artisan for a fellowship, write:

National Heritage Fellowships
Folk Arts Program
National Endowment for the Arts
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20506


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# 1988 National Heritage Fellowship Awardees

## Pedro Ayala

The *conjunto* musical tradition is an indigenous art form created on both sides of the Mexican/United States border out of a coming together of Mexican and central European musical traditions. Like Cajun music, its Louisiana cousin and parallel, conjunto features a small instrumental ensemble basically intended for dance accompaniment in which the button accordion plays a vital role. It is a social music, allowing for innovation, technical brilliance, creative composition, and musicianship of the highest order.

Don Pedro Ayala, known as "El Monarca del Acordeón" (the Monarch of the Accordion), has been playing this music for over 61 years. He was born on June 29, 1911 in a small town about a hundred miles southwest of Reynosa, Mexico. When he was about 8 years old, his family came to the United States where they settled in the Texas Rio Grande valley and worked as farm laborers. Pedro's father, Emilio Ayala, also played the clarinet and the accordion professionally; at age 10, his talented young son began accompanying him on *tambora* (drum) at local dances.

By 1935, when he began playing extensively as a professional, Pedro Ayala had begun to concentrate on the accordion as his principal instrument; since that time he has divided his time between work as a farmer and work as a musician. He has recorded 10 albums and numerous 78 and 45 rpm recordings and he has composed over 70 musical pieces including *polcas* (polkas), *chotes* (schottishes), *valses* (waltzes) and *redovas*. He has toured the United States in several ensembles and appeared in festivals in many states.

Like many other important folk musicians, Don Pedro has spent his professional life maintaining the stylistic core of his musical tradition while simultaneously trying out innovative techniques and ideas for the continuance of the tradition in new directions. He experimented with adding the stand-up bass (*tololoche*) to the basic conjunto ensemble, thereby setting the stage for such later conjunto stars as Valerio Longoria and Tony de la Rosa. The distinctive character of his compositions and the high quality of his musicianship have brought him numerous admirers and students, notable among whom are his own sons, Ramón, Pedro, and Emilio who now play in their own conjunto "Los Hermanos Ayala" (The Ayala Brothers). And it is Pedro, Jr. who plays the accordion in the group, carrying on the tradition that was so carefully handed on to him by his father. Without Pedro Ayala, the exciting and vital conjunto tradition that crosses not only national boundaries but influences both Mexican and Anglo popular music, would be but a faint echo of a lovely past.

## Kepka Belton

Wilson, Kansas, where Kepka Belton was born in 1934, is almost in the center of the state, a little northwest of Wichita. It is sometimes known as the "Czech capital of Kansas," and Kepka's family was among the earliest immigrants to settle there. She can trace her ancestors back four generations to a small town north of Prague in Czechoslovakia.

Kepka's father died before her birth; her mother had to teach school full time in order to support her small family. Kepka was left in the care of her maternal grandmother, who taught her the rudiments of Czech traditional artistic design including needlework and decorative painting. She remembers making the *kraslice* (Czech decorated eggs) as a child, working with melted wax, dyes made of natural materials and soaked wax paper under her grandmother's loving and critical eye. She believes she learned her sense of order and design from her grandmother, and that this stable and clear tradition has existed at least four generations in her family.

As Kepka matured, she entered Emporia State University where she majored in art with an emphasis on jewelry making. At that time she turned away from her traditional crafts towards jewelry and easel painting and worked for a two-year stint with Hallmark Cards in Kansas City creating greeting card designs. Then a teaching job opened up in Wilson and she felt drawn back home. She began to remember and reconstruct the

*Above:*
*Pedro Ayala*

*Below:*
*Kepka Belton*
*photo by Jeff Burkhead*

old forms of craftwork, especially the egg dyeing that she had learned from her grandmother. She recalls, "I thought, here I am, this is where I started out, this is my heritage."

Kepka is now known all over the country as "the egg lady." People write her from every state wanting recipes, eggs, designs, and information about their Czech heritage. She teaches egg painting and traditional Czech design in the local schools and has also participated in the Kansas Folk Apprenticeship Program where she has taught several young artists. Her work has been exhibited throughout the Midwest and at the Festival of American Folklife at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Like many European artists in the United States, Kepka Belton has not hesitated to benefit from her contacts with other European visual traditions, incorporating into some of her work design concepts from Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, and other egg painting cultures. Many of the symbols are held in common; many can be traced back to pre-Christian times in Eastern and Central Europe. "In every Czech village there is one woman who was the 'egg lady,' and I guess around here, I'm it." Mrs. Belton says. She has never visited her own ancestral homeland, but longs one day to go. "But if I never make it, I feel like I've at least found my origins in my art, and maybe I'm helping keep a little of this country's melting pot history alive," she says.

## Amber Densmore

Needleworkers, like many craftspeople, learn their art in families or communities. Amber Densmore, born 87 years ago in Chelsea, Vermont, where she still lives, learned in the time-honored way, under the tutelage of her mother. She began at the age of five by helping with the family mending; later, as a farm child whose labor was essential to the welfare of her family, she and her sister would practice crochet and other ornamental needlework traditions while they watched their mother's turkeys in the fields.

Amber's mother's best friend, Ina Grey, became the young girl's most important

*Above:*
*Amber Densmore*
*photo by Jane Beck*

*Below:*
*Michael Flatley*

teacher, showing her how to tat, quilt, hook, and do all the decorative fabric techniques generations of farm women have invented and mastered. She learned, too, from Ina Grey, the value of needlework as a reliable excuse for a bit of socializing; farm work is often lonely and monotonous, but a constructive and pleasurable afternoon can often be spent in harmonious group quilting and chatting.

Today Ms. Densmore cannot remember how many quilts, bedspreads, lace doilies and hooked rugs she has made during her lifetime. All her children and grandchildren have quilts made by her hands; she has never sold a single piece of her work. She laughs over the fact that she has so little to show for a lifetime's creative energy: "I've given it all away! You'll just have to go and see my grandchildren!"

Her most spectacular piece of work — the outstanding and properly treasured "Farm and Home Memory" quilt — is made up of 172 different embroidered blocks. Each block of the quilt top captures a memory of her life on the farm: her son bringing in the hay, killing turkeys for Thanksgiving, "sugaring off," her favorite Jersey cow, the special flowers in her garden. This remarkable piece of work won first prize at the Tunbridge World's Fair, Vermont's best known county fair — one of the greatest forms of recognition her own community could give her. Today she is working on a sequel, a "Flower Garden" quilt, made out of scraps she has treasured for years. "That piece is from the last dress my sister and I made alike before she died; that is a piece of my mother's wedding dress; that is Junior's favorite shirt."

Jane Beck, director of the Vermont Folklife Center, says of Amber Densmore: "Her work is truly exceptional. She personifies the term folk artist in its most complete sense. She is a visual spokeswoman for a tradition that is endangered in Vermont — the farm wife who works beside her husband and yet manages to find time for those quiet moments of artistic pleasure so necessary to create and produce beauty out of leftovers and scraps and the well-worn traditions of everyday." Amber Densmore thus represents the highest form of a facet of

American aesthetic creativity known to almost every American community; needlework is a proud tradition and she is one of its most creative and fruitful exemplars.

## Michael Flatley

Chicago, Illinois, has become through the years a major center for Irish resettlement. Michael Flatley was born there in 1958, son of parents who had immigrated from Sligo County, Ireland, and who had instilled in all their children a love and respect for the traditions of their old homeland, especially music and dance. Michael learned from his mother the basic rudiments of Irish step dance — a highly stylized form of dancing in which the upper body is kept totally rigid, the arms held vertically by the sides while the legs and the feet perform with athletic and rhythmic virtuosity. At the age of eleven, Michael tried to take formal lessons but was told that he was already too old to be able to learn properly. He took matters into his own hands, moved the cars out of his parents' garage in Oak Lawn, Illinois, and spent hundreds of hours there in the empty garage practicing the basic steps and creating his own variations. "It was the only way to win," he tells us now.

Irish step dancing is indeed highly competitive. Its aesthetic rules and principles are as clearly enunciated as those of ballet or the classical dances of India, but the requirements of step dancing are regularly tested as well in a series of contests that begin locally and work through the national competitions to end with the annual All-World Championships in Ireland. Judged by these severe criteria, Michael Flatley is the undisputed champion of Irish step dancing in the twentieth century. He has won 168 consecutive first place championships without defeat in 36 countries and 46 states. At age 17, he was the first American to win the title of All-World Dancing Champion at the annual competition in Dublin, as well as the first non-European to gain this title.

In a remarkable demonstration of the essential relationship between dance and music, Michael Flatley has also gained a major position in the field of Irish flute music, winning the All-Ireland Concert Flute Championship for three consecutive years, 1974-76. In 1978 he retired from general competition, as both a musician and dancer, having compiled an unsurpassed record of technical and aesthetic excellence. It is worth noting that in the same year he took the All-World Dancing Championship, he also won the Ireland Concert Flute Championship and the middleweight division of the Chicago Golden Gloves boxing championship.

Indeed there was a brief period when Michael Flatley considered turning professional boxer, but an offer from the Chieftains — widely known as the greatest Irish musical ensemble — to appear with them on a worldwide tour persuaded him to reconsider. His innovative dancing style combining jumps of astonishing height, dazzling scissors' kicks, lightning-fast footwork, and complex rhythmic syncopation, will influence Irish dance forever. There are those who decry the emphasis on individual virtuosity that Michael Flatley has brought to this field, but it is a longstanding part of the tradition itself. Flatley himself when asked what he thinks about when performing says, "I wonder if my legs are going to be there when I get down." The Chicago Irish can take great pride in their self-trained native son who has raised the standard for Irish dance everywhere.

## Sister Rosalia Haberl

Maria Rosalia Haberl was born in 1897 in Schonsee, Bavaria, a small town in southeast Germany. As a child, she attended the local school during the day, and the government-sponsored Royal Bobbin Lace School from 4 to 7 p.m., five days a week. When she had completed three years of after-school training, she took a one-year, advanced full-time course and graduated as a practiced lacemaker at the age of fourteen. "We had a lot of fun," she says of the lace school; "there were about 90 girls there, and we sang and prayed a lot."

She supported herself as a paid houseworker until 1917 when she entered a local convent in the Franciscan Order. She was transferred to Niagara Falls, Ontario in 1924

and from there to a convent house in Hankinson, North Dakota, where she has remained since 1928, aside from several years doing mission work in various Midwestern cities. The Hankinson chapter house has a long tradition of needlework and textile making; Sister Rosalia worked as a seamstress in the vestment department for 27 years until she retired from active responsibilities and six years ago took up again her childhood craft of lacemaking.

Her long period of inactivity has not caused her to lose her old skills; at the age of 90 she is undaunted by projects that require the manipulation of up to 100 bobbins. Sister Rosalia's technique is extraordinary; practiced outside observers have pointed out that "her knotting is tight, her patterns are consistent, and her concentration remains intense." She can easily carry on a conversation while manipulating sixty and seventy bobbins at top speed.

Although technically "retired" from convent responsibilities, Sister Rosalia's day still generally lasts from 5:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. "I go until it's time for eating or prayers," she says. In addition to the quiet hours spent making lace in the convent vestment room, she has added occasional attendance at craft shows around the state where her work is displayed. Although the use of yard lace for clerical vestments has decreased, she now has more than a hundred back orders for her small pieces, such as doilies. Her work is widely admired; the North Dakota Council on the Arts has recently prepared a one-person exhibit of her work that will tour not only the state, but the region.

Like the Royal Bobbin Lace School where Sister Rosalia learned, the folk-craft school movement of the nineteenth century has waned in Europe and was never really firmly established in the New World. Such complex crafts as bobbin lace have therefore declined during the past half century; many people even think of them as rare or endangered. It is good news, then, for lovers of the deft and brilliant art of bobbin lace that Sister Rosalia has recently agreed to train a local woman of German descent through the North Dakota Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. There is, perhaps, a chance that the merry clinking of the wooden bobbins will ring on into the next century, and that the deft fingers of the lacemakers will continue to entwine the apparently fragile openwork threads that may yet prove as strong and enduring as wood or stone.

## John Dee Holeman

John Dee Holeman was born in 1929 in Orange County, North Carolina, and now lives in nearby Durham. Together with his longtime friend, Quentin "Fris" Holloway, he is an exemplar of the Black musical style that arose in the so-called "Piedmont" area, the low rolling hills between the Appalachian Mountains and the Atlantic coastal plain, from Virginia through North and South Carolina and Georgia down to Florida. This was a thriving string-band region — both Black and white — and the blues that arose in the area owed much to that tradition.

John Dee Holeman began to play guitar at the age of fourteen. He entertained at house parties and community gatherings while still a teenager. His guitar work demonstrates the lilting lightly-rhythmic melodic style of finger-picking characteristic of the region and sometimes identified with the late Elizabeth Cotton, but more accurately traced to early bluesmen of the 20s and 30s such as Blind Boy Fuller. John Dee sings, too, in a rich expressive baritone. And he dances.

Dancing was a part of the normal country party during John Dee's boyhood — set dancing, square dancing, play party dancing, all kinds of couple dancing, and especially the informally competitive solo dancing in which dancers (mostly male) would vie for the crowd's attention and applause. The terms for this style vary and shift — flatfoot, tap, break down, bust down; the most frequent term perhaps is "buck-dancing" which some say originally consisted of "thirty-nine different steps" and which researchers tell us may have sketched out at one time the life experience of the Black male of the period through a series of mimetic steps — "walking the dog," "kicking the mule," "opening the gate," and "stealing partners." John Dee also does a masterful cranking of the Model T Ford and starting of a steam train.

*Above:*
*Sister Rosalia Haberl*
*photo by Deb Walluork*

*Below:*
*John Dee Holeman*
*photo courtesy of North Carolina Arts Council, Folklife Section*

Such solo dancing was often best performed in silence, since the floor sounding was such an important element, but often it is accompanied by hand-clapping or "patting." Amongst Black musicians and dancers, patting is distinctive from clapping by virtue of the varied pitches the patting hand elicits from arms, chest, thighs, and flanks. Fris Holloway is an experienced "patter" and he and John Dee produce rhythmic complexities — John Dee on the floor, and Fris on his own body — that rival entire drum sets.

John Dee and Fris still perform at house parties, but their work has become so popular they have taken it on the road throughout the South, in a highly successful "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning" tour, in three special tours through their own home state, and even overseas where the Arts America Program of the United States Information Agency sent them as part of an ensemble that concertized throughout Southeast Asia. They exemplify the particular quality that has made the Piedmont tradition so exceptional among all Black musical traditions, the joining of hands, feet, voices, and instruments in a supportive, complex interaction of melodic rhythm or rhythmic melody. The remarkable artistry of John Dee Holeman is a coherent and masterful presentation of these very special arts of the Piedmont.

## Albert Luandrew (Sunnyland Slim)

Albert Luandrew, later to be know as Sunnyland Slim, was born in 1907 in Vance, a small town near Clarksdale in the cotton and share-cropping area of northwestern Mississippi. As a boy he ploughed with a mule and did other farm work, but he developed an early interest in music and tried his best to listen to all the local blues men. At fourteen he began his musical career playing a self-taught style of piano and organ accompaniment in a local church. By 1924 his musical gifts were so apparent that he got his first real job as a musician, playing piano in a small movie theater in nearby Lamber, Mississippi.

*Above:*
*Sunnyland Slim*
*photo courtesy of*
*Airway Records*

*Below:*
*Kenny Sidle*
*photo by Phil Samuell*

He was a tall, slender young man and early picked up the nickname, Sunnyland Slim, by which he was to be known throughout his professional life. In the mid-twenties, he moved to Memphis, Tennessee, to try his fortune in the musical world of Beale Street, lined at that time with innumerable barrelhouses and honky-tonks. He kept Memphis as his home base for fifteen years, though he played all over the South, appearing briefly in Ma Rainey's *Arkansas Swift Foot Revue*, and working with every important blues artist of the period — Blind Blake, Blind Boy Fuller, Roosevelt Sykes, Memphis Slim, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Little Brother Montgomery.

In 1942, as he described it, "Memphis got a little rough and they closed the joints and they was the places where they had pianos and you can be damn sure a piano player goin' to be closed with them." He worked in Missouri for a little while, but upon getting an offer to cut a record in Chicago, he moved there, supporting himself by factory work, truck driving, and an occasional club appearance. The original record deal fell through, and it was five years before he made his first recording, but during those five years he established himself firmly as one of that first group of major blues artists that made Chicago a name as famous in blues circles as New Orleans and Memphis.

His music makes clear the debt the later urban styles owe to the Delta levees — the raw, wrenching power of piano and voice, hard-hitting and passionate in execution, but disciplined and solid in form. Sunnyland Slim has never deviated much from his earliest musical roots, though during recent years he typically plays with drums or in small instrumental combinations and he enjoys throwing in musical quotations from Count Basie or Duke Ellington to spice his Delta tunes. The British jazz critic, Paul Oliver, describes attending an afternoon session in Chicago with Sunnyland Slim and his friends — "This was the Chicago blues in all its gutsy ferocity... 'authentic' blues...the blues and boogie of Chicago as it was then, as it is today, played and sung...no holds barred, without fake or 'folk'."

Sunnyland Slim has by now appeared on numerous recordings and has played in Ger-

many, Canada, and Great Britain. He is known throughout the Chicago blues community as a friend and guide for aspiring young artists. His old friend and neighbor, Studs Terkel, says of him, "Slim is one of the last of the breed of country blues singers, who in their youth moved north. An old colleague of Big Bill Broonzy, he, like Bill, has been gallantly and eloquently carrying on in the tradition... he is a living piece of our folk history."

## Kenny Sidle

Kenny Sidle was born in 1931 in a log cabin in Licking County in central Ohio. He still lives a short distance away from his birthplace and works for the Owens-Corning Fiberglass Corporation in Newark, Ohio. He is among the finest fiddlers in the country, and he clearly stands at the center of Ohio's vital fiddling tradition.

The fiddle was the pre-eminent musical instrument of the American frontier and today it still takes precedence over the more frequently mentioned six-string guitar and the Afro-American banjo. The fiddle was easy to make and convenient to carry; when forcefully and briskly played it could accompany dancing; it also could sing the long tender lines of European balladry. Wherever it went it formed the centerpiece of the small instrumental ensembles that are central to folk music traditions throughout Europe and the near-East. In Ohio it accompanied the earliest settlers as they built their frontier towns along the Ohio River, where travellers as early as 1800 reported fiddling by both Black and white musicians.

Kenny Sidle grew up listening to his own father and his uncle, both fine fiddlers; they let him have a tiny fiddle early on and at the age of five, he made his first public appearance on the stage of a traveling medicine show. He reports that his first tune was "The Mockingbird," which he played on one string with one finger. His debut was a roaring success, but he retired immediately after and did not return to professional activity until the 1950s, primarily playing at that time for local radio programs and especially for dances. To this day he is sought out by the finest square dance callers in the region.

Kenny Sidle has also attained a legendary reputation as a contest fiddler; he has won numerous state and local championships, as well as placing repeatedly in the top ten of the Grand Masters Fiddle Championship in Nashville. He fiddles frequently, too, in Canada where his precise and lively style is much admired. Indeed, some feel his music — like much fiddle playing across Ohio — is strongly influenced by what fiddlers refer to as the "notey-ness" of French Canadian fiddle music. However, it is difficult to place Kenny Sidle in any single line of musical development; his playing may feature the precise inclusion of many separate notes, but it is also smooth, melodic, and very sophisticated, reflecting influences not only from French Canada, but from the Texas long-bow style. Ohio is rich in both styles; perhaps the masterly music of Kenny Sidle correctly reflects some of the aesthetic compromises and choices made available to musicians in our extraordinarily mobile nation. It's absolutely first-class music, anyway, and, as one of his fiddle contest rivals and neighbors, Cecil Plum, wrote us, "his music stands alone, without the help of acrobatics, gymnastics, head-bobbing, or hip-flipping. When it's over, we wonder when we'll get to hear it again."

## Willie Mae Ford Smith

Willie Mae Ford Smith was born in 1906 in Rolling Fork, Mississippi, a little town between Vicksburg and Greenville in the central Mississippi Delta. She was seventh of a family of fourteen. She recalls, "We were so poor our coats did double time as our blankets. We sometimes slept four in the bed, but we had so much happiness, so much love, so much fun. My father was a deacon, and now I can see he just kept us singing to keep from thinking." During Ms. Smith's childhood, the family moved to Memphis, finally to settle in St. Louis, Missouri.

Ms. Smith's father, a railroad brakeman and devout Baptist, organized Willie Mae and three other daughters into a family quartet that was well received the first time they sang publicly at the National Baptist

Convention of 1922, where they created a stir with their own arrangement of "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel." Later, after her sisters retired from the quartet, Willie Mae decided upon a career as a soloist. She has a high soprano voice and even considered advanced study in classical music, but after hearing Artella Hutchins sing gospel songs at the National Baptist Convention of 1926, she changed her career plans and devoted herself entirely to gospel music. She began singing professionally in churches both in St. Louis and throughout the Midwest.

Willie Mae Ford Smith has always been an excellent organizer. She joined early on with Dr. Thomas Dorsey and Sallie Martin to set up the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses where she was director for many years and where she also offered an annual solo concert. She became an ordained minister in the late 20s. Gospel authority Anthony Heilbut says of her, "She became a model of gospel — in vocal delivery, physical deportment, performance strategy, vocational commitment." She taught and influenced countless other singers; the legendary Myrtle Scott, Martha Bass, Joe May and — best known of all — Mahalia Jackson. The enormous energy and dedication she brought to these multiple activities — organizing, teaching, nurturing — are perhaps responsible for the fact that she did not make any recordings until well into her sixties. Today we can hear her on several albums and see her perform in the award winning documentary film, *Say Amen, Somebody*, and she continues to this day to head the Solo Bureau of the National Convention of Gospel Choirs.

Her fame in gospel circles is based not only upon her organization and institutional contributions, but her aesthetic achievements as well. She brought to the gospel movement the range of vocal effects she heard as a young girl in the country churches; she ornamented and bent the tones of the straight-forward hymns she gave new prominence; she helped the great Mahalia Jackson develop the "flowers and feathers" that so adorned her vocal style. Like the country Mississippi preachers she heard so often as a child, she "talked it up" between songs, originating the style now called "sermonettes" used by almost all gospel singers. Above all, she sang out of emotion, using every vocal effect from growling to crooning to express her sense of the moment. "The gospel song is the Christian blues," she says, "I'm like the blues singer, when something's rubbing me wrong, I sing out my soul to settle me down." Her imprint upon the gospel soul will long outlive her; she may have "settled herself down," but she has uplifted thousands.

## Clyde "Kindy" Sproat

Clyde Sproat wrote of himself, "I was born in Kohala on the Big Island of Hawaii, raised in Honokane Iki, a valley two hours away from the end of the car road." Transportation to the valley was by mule pack train. His family lived in rural isolation and simplicity; Clyde still remembers how his mother played the banjo and sang with her children every night after supper.

"We sat on mats that were woven from the leaves of the pandanus tree and watched the reflection of the sun rising up the east wall of the valley, then dancing on the trees at the very top of the ridge before slowly fading out of sight. I sang my heart out. At that time I felt like we were singing the sun to sleep, so in the morning as he crept over the west ridge with his long shadowy legs, he would be warm and friendly and let us have another good day of swimming and fishing in the stream and doing all the things that little boys do in a day."

Later the family moved to Niulii, still on the Big Island, but closer to schools, churches, restaurants, and saloons where the little boy used to stop to listen to the master slack key guitar players of the time — John Akina, John Kama, Kalei Kalalia. In school his principal was also a master musician, and under his direction the children assembled every morning to sing the old Hawaiian songs and learn the meaning and the history behind them. Although the young Clyde Sproat already knew some 400 songs from his family repertoire; his school experience turned him towards even greater appreciation of his historic Hawaiian heritage.

*Above:*
*Willie Mae Ford Smith*
*photo courtesy of*
*George T. Nierenberg*

*Below:*
*Clyde "Kindy" Sproat*
*photo by Jeff Skvaril*

Clyde was learning another repertoire as well, the songs of the Hawaiian cowboys (panio*los*) of the nearby ranches. The island of Hawaii to this day contains the largest ranches in the United States under single ownership; in Clyde's boyhood they were bustling with energy, largely sparked by Mexican *vaqueros* who had been brought in during the late 19th Century to help develop the new ranch economy. Along with their technical skills, the Mexican ranchmen brought their musical traditions, especially that of singing with stringed instrumental accompaniment; and as they began to make their homes in this new land, they taught tunes, instrument construction and harmonies to their new Hawaiian co-workers. Today their influence, once so radical, has become profoundly accepted into the mainstream of Hawaiian music; and the idea of accompanying a song with a stringed instrument (perhaps once a guitar or a small Mexican folk guitar called *jarana*) has become the common convention of singing with the ukulele.

Now at the age of 60, Clyde lives with his wife in a house he built near the valley where he was raised, still beyond the end of the road. His reputation often calls him away; he has sung at Carnegie Hall and the National Folk Festival. He is featured on a double tape recording of paniolo music published by the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts in Honolulu. His exquisite falsetto, his astonishingly forceful and supple voice, his extensive repertoire, but perhaps most important, the depth and sincerity of his attachment to what he calls the old tradition, make him a true Hawaiian treasure.

## Arthel "Doc" Watson

In the fall of 1987, Doc Watson, possibly the "best flat picker that ever was," announced his retirement from active touring. His statement was treated as a news event by publications as diverse as the *New York Times*, *People Magazine*, and *Grit*. His thousands of fans were only consoled by the fact that he hasn't exactly set the date, though he plans to return to his home in Deep Gap, North Carolina some time in the near future.

*Above:*
*Arthel "Doc" Watson*
*photo by Peter Figen*

*Below:*
*Yang Fang Nhu*
*photo by Winne Lambrecht*

"Twenty six years on the road is enough," he says.

He was born in Stoney Fork, North Carolina in 1923, the sixth of nine children. An infection left him blind at the age of two. He entered the Raleigh School for the Blind at the age of ten and stayed for four years. His musical education began at home with a new harmonica in his stocking every Christmas and one day a homemade banjo. "My Dad picked that little banjo up and said, "Here, son, I want you to learn to play it real well...You get where you can play that thing pretty good; it might help you get through the world."

His musical education continued in the home through a battery-powered radio and a small windup record player with a stack of 78 records his father had picked up from a neighbor. He began to specialize in guitar, playing first a Stella that he bought at the age of 12 for twelve dollars, gradually moving to a Les Paul special, an electric instrument on which he first began to play professionally and on which he developed the virtuosic, highly-ornamented picking that was to make him famous.

He married and soon had two children to care for. He played music wherever he could, for local dances and over the radio. Finally he joined a country swing and rockabilly band, "Jack Williams and the Country Gentlemen," as lead vocalist and electric guitarist. But he continued to play also with his country neighbors. When folklorist Ralph Rinzler scheduled a Folkways recording session at the home of old time banjoist and singer Clarence "Tom" Ashley of nearby Johnson County, Tennessee, Tom thought it a good idea to invite Doc.

Rinzler, now Assistant Secretary at the Smithsonian Institution, recognized Watson's musical talents, but suggested that he replace his thin body electric Fender with an acoustic instrument for the session. The two resulting LPs, Old *Time Music at Clarence Ashley's, Volumes 1 and 2*, are still in print 27 years later. Rinzler became Doc's friend and admirer, and helped him launch a professional career.

In 1961, Watson played at Town Hall in New York City and at the Newport Folk Festival. A thunderous reception at the Newport

Festival of 1963 set Watson on a concert career which has rarely slackened. He has produced 24 LP recordings and won many awards from his state, his community, and the music industry. "Horowitz and Heifitz couldn't have any higher musical standards than Doc Watson," says Pete Seeger, a friend and supporter of Doc Watson for some twenty years.

Doc Watson may be going home now, but he has set for countless younger musicians a sterling example of dedicated musicianship, taste, elegance, and musical wisdom. Chet Atkins, another guitar legend, says of him, "He's a great man and I hope he won't completely retire. I hope he'll still play on the front porch and maybe a lot of people will come and visit and learn some things from him because Doc's certainly got a lot of knowledge to give out...And if he ever makes a comeback tour, I'd like to play rhythm for him..."

## Yang Fang Nhu

Yang Fang Nhu came to the United States with her husband, Yang Nouyi, in 1984. She was born in 1912 in a small Hmong mountain village of ten households in northern Laos; when she married at the age of 16, she moved to her husband's village nearby, a larger one of fifty households. They were farming people; she bore and raised seven children and did her share of the farm work. Her special responsibility, however, was the growing and preparation of hemp from which, each year, she wove three skirts — one special one to be worn on New Year's and two for everyday. Every year also she wove cotton cloth for men's and children's clothing, and she always stood ready to help neighbors who were having difficulty with the complex requirements of the Laotian loom.

When still a child, Fang Nhu was recognized by the village neighbor women as a person who had the patient temperament and the ability to recall complicated steps in a long process that is necessary to the weaver's art. Her mother had shown her the fundamentals (every woman in her village wove), but the mastery of the complex methods of loom preparation, the dyeing, batiking, embroidery, and pleating, required the kind of deep concentration that only major artists seem to give their work. She had the understanding of the process that sometimes seems inborn and the determination to get it exactly right. Today she is not only a master weaver, but a fount of information concerning loom construction, the Hmong sword shuttle and bobbin winders, and the special Hmong batiking tools and methods.

During the Vietnam War, the Yang family moved to Vientiane, the capital of Laos, and in 1978 they left their homeland by boat, crossing the Mekong River into Thailand. Since Mr. Yang had received military training during the French occupation of southeast Asia, the family was allowed to immigrate to France. They now have children in France and Australia as well as the United States. Since Hmong families prefer to stay with their youngest son (who until recently lived in Providence, Rhode Island), the Yang family settled there in 1984. With the assistance of the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, Yang Fang Nhu built a proper Laotian loom and took up her weaving again. For the first time in twenty years, she wove herself a skirt, she batiked the cloth and dyed it with indigo. Today she is passing on her extensive knowledge, her unfailing eye for clear and elegant design, and her long-remembered skills to her daughter-in-law, la Moua Yang, who has become her apprentice. It may be many years before the hills of Laos will shelter weavers of the quality of Yang Fang Nhu, but her tradition will survive at least another generation in the United States.

# The National Heritage Fellowship Awardees 1982-1987



## 1982

Dewey Balfa
Cajun Fiddler
Basile, LA

Joe Heaney*
Irish Singer
Brooklyn, NY

Tommy Jarrell*
Appalachian Fiddler
Mt. Airy, NC

Bessie Jones*
Georgia Sea Island Singer
Brunswick, GA

George Lopez
Santos Woodcarver
Cordova, NM

Brownie McGhee
Blues Guitarist
Oakland, CA

Hugh McGraw
Shape Note Singer
Bremen, GA

Lydia Mendoza
Mexican-American Singer
Houston, TX

Bill Monroe
Bluegrass Musician
Nashville, TN

Elijah Pierce*
Carver/Painter
Columbus, OH

Adam Popovich
Tamburitza Musician
Dolton, IL

Georgeann Robinson*
Osage Ribbonworker
Bartlesville, OK

Duff Severe
Saddle Maker
Pendleton, OR

Philip Simmons
Ornamental Ironworker
Charleston, SC

Sanders "Sonny" Terry*
Blues Musician
Holliswood, NY

## 1983

Sister Mildred Barker
Shaker Singer
Poland Springs, ME

Rafael Cepeda
Bomba Musician/Dancer
Santurce, PR

Ray Hicks
Appalachian Storyteller
Banner Elk, NC

Stanley Hicks
Appalachian Musician/
Storyteller/Instrument
Maker
Vilas, NC

John Lee Hooker
Blues Guitarist/Singer
San Carlos, CA

Mike Manteo
Sicilian Marionettist
Staten Island, NY

Narciso Martinez
Texas-Mexican
Accordionist/Composer
San Benito, TX

Lanier Meaders
Potter
Cleveland, GA

Almeda Riddle*
Ballad Singer
Greers Ferry, AR

Simon St. Pierre
French-American Fiddler
Smyrna Mills, ME

Joe Shannon
Irish Piper
Chicago, IL

Alex Stewart*
Cooper/Woodworker
Sneedville, TN

Ada Thomas
Chitimacha Basketmaker
Charenton, LA

Lucinda Toomer*
Black Quilter
Columbus, GA

Lem Ward*
Decoy Carver/Painter
Crisfield, MD

Dewey Williams
Shape Note Singer
Ozark, AL

## 1984

Clifton Chenier*
Creole Accordionist
Lafayette, LA

Bertha Cook
Knotted Bedspread Maker
Boone, NC

Joseph Cormier
Cape Breton Violinist
Waltham, MA

Elizabeth Cotton*
Black Songster/Song
writer
Syracuse, NY

Burlon Craig
Potter
Vale, NC

Albert Fahlbusch
Hammered Dulcimer
Maker/Player
Scottsbluff, NE

Janie Hunter
Black Singer/Storyteller
Johns Island, SC

Mary Jane Manigault
Black Seagrass Basket
Maker
Mt. Pleasant, SC

Genevieve Mougin
Lebanese-American Lace
Maker
Bettendorf, IA

Martin Mulvihill*
Irish-American Fiddler
Bronx, NY

Howard (Sandman) Sims
Black Tap Dancer
New York, NY

Ralph Stanley
Appalachian Banjo
Player/Singer
Coeburn, VA

Margaret Tafoya
Santa Clara Pueblo Potter
Espanola, NM

Dave Tarras
Klezmer Clarinetist
Brooklyn, NY

Paul Tiulana
Eskimo Maskmaker/
Dancer/Singer
Anchorage, AK

Cleofes Vigil
Hispanic Storyteller/
Singer
San Cristobal, NM

Emily Kau'i Zuttermeister
Hula Master
Kaneohe, HI

## 1985

Eppie Archuleta
Hispanic Weaver
San Luis Valley, CO

Periklis Halkias
Greek Clarinetist
New York, NY

Jimmy Jausoro
Basque Accordionist
Boise, ID

Mealii Kalama
Hawaiian Quilter
Honolulu, HI

Lily May Ledford*
Appalachian Musician/
Singer
Lexington, KY

Leif Melgaard
Norwegian Woodcarver
Minneapolis, MN

Bua Xou Mua
Hmong Musician
Portland, OR

Julio Negron-Rivera
Puerto Rican Instrument
Maker
Morovis, PR

Alice New Holy Blue Legs
Lakota Sioux Quill Artist
Grass Creek, SD

Glenn Ohrlin
Cowboy Singer/
Storyteller/Illustrator
Mountain View, AR

Henry Townsend
Blues Musician/
Songwriter
St. Louis, MO

H. "Spoons" Williams*
Spoons/Bones Player/
Poet
Philadelphia, PA

## 1986

Alphonse "Bois Sec"
Ardoin
Black Creole Accordionist
Eunice, LA

Earnest Bennett
Anglo-American Whittler
Indianapolis, IN

Helen Cordero
Pueblo Potter
Cochiti, NM

Sonia Domsch
Czech-American Bobbin
Lace Maker
Atwood, KS

Canray Fontenot
Black Creole Fiddler
Welsh, LA

John Jackson
Black Songster/Guitarist
Fairfax Station, VA

Peou Khatna
Cambodian Court Dancer/
Choreographer
Silver Spring, MD

Valerio Longoria
Mexican-American
Accordionist
San Antonio, TX

Joyce Doc Tate
Nevaquaya
Comanche Indian Flutist
Apache, OK

Luis Ortega
Hispanic-American
Rawhide Worker
Paradise, CA

Ola Belle Reed
Appalachian Banjo Picker/
Singer
Rising Sun, MD

Jenny Thlunaut*
Tlingit Chilkat Blanket
Weaver
Haines, AK

Nimrod Workman
Appalachian Ballad Singer
Mascot, TN/Chattaroy,
WV

## 1987

Juan Alindato
Carnival Maskmaker
Ponce, PR

Louis Bashell
Slovenian Accordionist/
Polka Master
Milwaukee, WI

Genoveva Castellanoz
Mexican-American *Corona*
Maker
Nyssa, OR

Thomas Edison "Brownie"
Ford
Anglo-Comanche Cowboy
Singer/Storyteller
Hebert, LA

Kansuma Fujima
Japanese-American
Dancer
Los Angeles, CA

Claude Joseph Johnson
Afro-American Religious
Singer/Orator
Atlanta, GA

Raymond Kane
Hawaiian Slack Key
Guitarist/Singer
Wai'anae, HI

Wade Mainer
Appalachian Banjo Picker/
Singer
Flint, MI

Sylvester McIntosh
Crucian Singer/
Bandleader
St. Croix, VI

Allison "Totie" Montana
Mardi Gras Chief/Costume
Maker
New Orleans, LA

Alex Moore, Sr.
Afro-American Blues
Pianist
Dallas, TX

Emilio and Senaida
Romero
Hispanic-American
Craftsworkers in Tin and
Embroidery
Santa Fe, NM

Newton Washburn
Split Ash Basketmaker
Littleton, NH

* (deceased)

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